They Run Through History:
Pacific Northwest Rivers in Time

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In the mid-1930s, the Bonneville Power Administration embarked on truly astounding tasks to dam the Columbia River, generate hydroelectricity, and distribute that power throughout the region at discounted rates. Because many Americans distrusted public power as mere socialism, BPA created promotional literature, such as the film "The Columbia: America's Greatest Power Stream." It narrated the region's history, told in many ways through the river's eyes. Begun during the Depression, "The Columbia" appeared in 1949 and climaxed with dramatic footage of the massive flood that in 1948 hit Vanport, Oregon. The film's producer, Stephen B. Kahn, used the devastating flood to call for more dams in the Columbia Basin, a challenge that would, in his narrative's frame, fulfill the region's democratic promise.

Here is an opening scene:

http://ytcropper.com/embed/kX55f09f613684e

These opening moments of "The Columbia" captured a series of assumptions and myths and arguably even the guiding ethos for the people with power relating to the big rivers of the region.

Americans long saw in their western territories a place for "an empire of freedom and opportunity," as the narrator claimed. And to be sure, there *were* opportunities in the North American West, and many of them derived from nature. The film's rich context and language speaks unself-consciously in the rhetoric of empire and colonialism in ways that strike our ears as naïve at best and blindly racist and more at worst. Americans would "build a colonial empire sending out its boundless resources to the far corners of the earth," something the narrator celebrates without considering the economic implications of making the region merely a provider of raw materials. And what about river itself? The Columbia was a "wild and uncontrolled giant," and its "power roared unharnessed to the Pacific." A waste, that is. So, in just two minutes we learn this region stood for freedom, that "untamed" rivers needed control but offered hope, and that all residents stood to gain from river development.

But not so fast. This excerpt—like so much media, history, and popular discussion—erases the Native presence on the rivers. Despite being here, intimately connected to the rivers since time immemorial, "The Columbia" suggests in a phrase that Indians had been here, fishing salmon, just since the days of Lewis and Clark. Or at least, that's the implication: that history started when representatives from the U.S. government first appeared on the scene. This conceit belies the deep history in the region of Native peoples living with the waters.

Water has long organized human life and settlement. Among Native peoples of the Pacific Northwest, that was no different. Tribal groups occupied territories often defined basically by interwoven watersheds. Smaller bands and family groups organized their lives seasonally around different streams, such as the Alpowa Band of Nimiipuu along Alpowa Creek. For those on the Plateau, the Columbia River served as a magnet of life where they harvested salmon, traded goods, and participated in social exchanges.

Northwestern rivers were conduits for newcomers who, inevitably, settled along waterways, too. Explorers like Lewis & Clark or David Thompson floated the Snake and Columbia and reported on abundant furs, trees, and grasslands, which increased interest in the region. Missionaries came in the 1830s, settling along creeks and introducing irrigation in places like Lapwai among the Nez Perce. Farmers and miners followed close behind, again centering their activities around waterways. As more and more Euroamericans arrived in Oregon Country, they used rivers more and more in both old ways and new.

Sometimes, I find it hard to think of the nineteenth century as an industrial one, and I have found many students and audiences think serious environmental degradation came only in the twentieth century. But we should recognize the extensive impacts earlier. By the 1850s, the Northwest exported timber. By the 1860s, the region exported canned salmon. Mining diverted and de-watered streams. Logging along rivers accelerated erosion and warmed the water, which hurt salmon. Agriculture also hastened erosion and when irrigation developed, dams and canals rerouted streams and profoundly changed habitats. Cities dumped waste into streams, killing fish and spreading disease. By 1900 or thereabouts, then, western rivers were well used but not necessarily used well.

Concern developed but did so in strange, contradictory, ambivalent ways during the dawn of the American conservation movement. Often associated with efforts to preserve forests and parks and to clean up pollution, conservation also meant eliminating waste and for many American policymakers and resource managers that meant *total use* of water. Indeed, when he was the US Commerce Secretary in the 1920s, Herbert Hoover called for each river system to be developed to its "maximum utilization," and several decades later the federal government produced a series of reports entitled, "Our Rivers: Total Use for Greater Wealth," capturing perfectly a dominant strain of conservation's ethos. If streams ran to the sea unused, that constituted a waste. This view dominated thinking among large swaths of the public and seemingly the entirety of American government well into the post-World War II era.

The most common way to save rivers from "waste" were dams, for dams put rivers to work. Dams helped improve navigation. They helped minimize floods—at least theoretically. They helped store water so it could be used by irrigators, since Nature inconveniently dropped rain at times when farmers didn't need it and withheld it when they did. And dams produced hydroelectric power. While some of these transformations might be done by citizens banding together or power companies or local governments investing in river development, for the big projects and especially those on the biggest rivers federal bureaucrats and engineers in the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers stepped in.

So, conservationists and engineers and politicians and citizens looked on Northwest rivers, big ones and small, with eyes full of visions—confident ones. In 1910, a Progressive era booster of river development, John L. Mathews published *The Conservation of Water* in which he promoted the development of the Columbia River and its tributary streams. According to Mathews, managers—experts all—could ensure water was "applied at *exactly* the *right* time in the *right* amount and under *perfect control*." In Mathews' final chapter, he took an imaginative journey upstream: "We enter it at the sea gate, at the mouth of a great river, where we find a port bustling with commercial activity." Continuing up the engineered river, the reader found booming cities without pollution since power comes from the dams. Further on, public buildings (paid for by water conservation) line the banks that are themselves protected by soil stabilization measures beside which are endless irrigation villages. In short, nature's "dilapidation has given

way to perfection." Further upstream, a dam blocks the river but locks move ships and a power plant generates power. The engineers have perfected nature and society by developing the Columbia River.

Three decades later, not much had changed in boosters' enthusiasm. Oregon journalist-turned-politician, Richard L. Neuberger, captured the enthusiasm of these days and this project of basin transformation in his classic book, *Our Promised Land* (1938). Neuberger could wax poetic: "The river rumbles and roars. It thrashes against granite walls and gnaws ominously at basalt cliffs. Around jagged rocks it booms like the surf. . . . Wild and defiant, the river tumbles unharnessed to the Pacific." But ultimately, the "hours of this freedom are numbered," because a greater good—electricity—could serve the public and reform society. And this is significant: boosters for dams didn't simply see them as power producers or engines of economic development; they saw them as agents of positive social change, levelers of social inequalities, instruments of good.

And they were right, in some senses. Bonneville Dam and Grand Coulee Dam came online in time to provide power not only to rural Northwesterners but to fuel the wartime industries that helped defeat Germany and Japan in WWII. In peacetime, even more positive dividends might be paid if we could just develop the Columbia (and beyond) more fully. Doing so just might fulfill democracy's promise. Don't believe me? Just watch and listen to the BPA:

http://ytcropper.com/embed/kX55f0a00b611a6

Full development of the Columbia or Snake, the Skagit or the Spokane, the Deschutes or John Day, and countless other rivers offered great benefits. But there were costs. In the circles I travel most often—and, I'm making assumptions, but perhaps yours too—those costs are far more readily apparent than the benefits. Something wild was suppressed with all the dams and slackwater. Pollution increased from the industries they supported. Costs for maintenance—such as dredging and dealing with concentrated contaminants behind the dams—are exorbitant. And salmon have not fared well. The cultural losses associated with declining salmon and displacement of Native people because of the dam-building binge at places such as Celilo Falls in the twentieth century represent one of regional history's most tragic stories.

Not all was lost. The development ethos that prevailed for a century faced a steep challenge in the mid-to-late-twentieth century. To be sure, Native peoples challenged it from the beginning because the development of the region's rivers displaced them and reduced, if not destroyed, the native fishery and with it a major source of identity for many tribal groups. They took to the courts and often were successful only to discover that enforcing their rights failed outside federal courtrooms.

New and powerful challenges to total conservation came not from a politically marginalized social group but from an elite well-equipped to offer alternatives to more development, more dams, more pollution.

Several examples exist, but let's start close to here, along the Snake River at a place called High Mountain Sheep. There, the federal government decided it wanted to build a hydroelectric dam. Idaho Power wanted one too. The conflict meandered through various administrative levels before winding up at the U.S. Supreme Court. At the time, a Pacific Northwesterner, William O. Douglas, sat on the Court, and he had more than a passing interest in nature and even had a summer home for a time not many miles from here near Lostine, Oregon. Writing for the Court in 1967, Douglas quickly moved beyond the central legal issue—public

dam or private dam—to the real issue when he suggested the real question was "whether *any* dam should be constructed." His decision, although somewhat narrow and technical and legal, effectively quashed the dam. It began reversing the trend of only approving more dams.

The next year came an even more wide-ranging reversal when Congress passed the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This act complemented past policies of constructing dams by preserving some rivers without them, declaring in ponderous Congressional language "that certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations." The law owed much to Idaho Senator Frank Church and thus, perhaps, wore a strong northwestern imprint on it. The act designated several rivers immediately into the National Wild and Scenic River System, including the Middle Forks of both Idaho's Clearwater and Salmon Rivers, as well as Oregon's Rogue River. So, the Northwest had three of the first eight wild rivers. The act also listed several additional rivers Congress thought could be included after further study; these included five Idaho rivers, and one each in Oregon and Washington. Of the 27 suggested rivers, a quarter of them were in the Northwest (if you are willing to include Montana, it is a third).

The reversal begun with Douglas's decision and the ascendance of free-flowing rivers as valuable resources in and of themselves marked a new epoch. Since those heady days of the late 1960s, total conservation and restraint have coexisted uneasily. In places like wealthy Seattle, dedicated environmentalists work to daylight streams and restore habitat so that salmon might once again course through the Emerald City. In the town where I work, we can still see residual bumper stickers that say Can Helen, Not Salmon referring to one-time Representative Helen Chenoweth who questioned how salmon could be endangered since she could buy canned salmon in Albertson's. On the small Elwha River in Washington's Olympic Peninsula, we have chosen to remove dams and salmon are returning. Meanwhile, the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission have become increasingly important in co-managing and restoring the region's fish and watersheds.

But we can also still hear politicians, reclamation engineers, and farmers dream aloud for more dams on rivers or extending the Columbia Basin Project. We still see signs on barns saying "Save Our Dams." In places like the Klamath Basin, salmon streams run out of water as federal managers and local farmers and tribes and biologists and policymakers look deeply at history and fish and waterfowl and economics and see no easy solution to over-allocated water.

And then there are countless Northwesterners who just love rivers. Love to fish them with dry flies or bait. Float down them or jet-boat up them. Windsurf on them. And reclamation engineers, commercial fishers, barge operators love the rivers in their fashion too. Last winter, when a 65-food crack was found in Wanapum Dam, we were reminded of our vulnerability but with the water drawn down we could see sand beaches again along the riverbank.

When Al asked me to join this panel, his charge was a big one: "Can you provide a broad historical overview of the region and its inhabitants' relationship to rivers . . . in 20 minutes?" Sure, Al, no problem.

So what's the story in a nutshell? Rivers have organized Northwestern lives since time immemorial. Residents relied on them and asked much of them. In asking more, they and their institutions and technologies reorganized those rivers and changed them profoundly. And sometimes those changes made old ways and new ways clash, at once opening and foreclosing

opportunities. Still, in the First Salmon ceremony, in opening day, in the first or last float down a wild stream, in the protest opposing or supporting the four Lower Snake River dams, or even just the beautiful view driving alongside a nameless or iconic stream, rivers still organize our regional identities.